

The Theatre: Portrait of Corruption

Williams' 'Sweet Bird of Youth' Opens

By BROOKS ATKINSON

STILL possessed of the demons, Tennessee Williams has written another vivid play. "Sweet Bird of Youth" he calls it with ironic pity. Under Elia Kazan's direction it is brilliantly acted at the Martin Beck, where it opened last evening.

It is a portrait of corruption and evil, which are Mr. Williams' familiar subjects. The two chief characters represent two aspects of civilized degeneracy—an aging motion-picture actress who is fleeing reality in drink, drugs and dissipation; a young gigolo who has cheap dreams of glory and means to fulfill them by cheap means.

Mr. Williams is not revenging himself on anyone this time. "Sweet Bird of Youth" is hardly a noble play. But it has overtones of pity for those who are damned. Although the old harridan from Hollywood is a monster, she is no fiend; she knows what she is doing and why. Although the young man is a monster, he represents the seamy side of the American dream. He means to take whatever he can snatch; he is the perpetual adolescent, steeped in gaudy illusions of success and grandeur.

At the end, in a corrosively humorous scene, the screen star is recalled from damnation by reports of success in Hollywood, and she starts pulling herself together with professional acumen. She is never so far gone that a box-office statement cannot restore her.

But the young man—his youth gone, his abominations overwhelming him—has lost the will to go on living. He makes no attempt to escape a posse of barbarians who have announced that they are going to castrate him because he has infected a local belle with disease. He has burned out his soul with lies and depravity. When the play concludes he is accepting the horrors that await him.

If "Sweet Bird of Youth" is less shocking than this résumé suggests, it must be because of the nature of Mr. Williams' artistry as a writer. Is it a play that ranges wide through the lower depths, touching on political violence, as well as diseases of mind and body. But it has the spontaneity of an improvisation. Nothing seems to be planned. It begins in comic squalor in a hotel room. In



Geraldine Page and Paul Newman in a scene from the drama by Tennessee Williams, "Sweet Bird of Youth."

The Cast

SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH, a drama by Tennessee Williams, with music by Paul Bowles. Staged by Elia Kazan; scenery and lighting by Jo Mielziner; presented by Cheryl Crawford; costumes by Anna Hill Johnstone; costumes for Geraldine Page by Theoni Vachnioti Aldredge; production stage manager, David Paroll. At the Martin Beck Theatre.

Chance Wayne	Paul Newman
Princess Pazmezoğlu	Geraldine Page
Fly	Milton J. Williams
Mald	Patricia Ripley
George Scudder	Logan Ramsey
Hatcher	John Napier
Boss Finley	Sidney Blackmer
Tom Junior	Rip Torn
Aunt Nonnie	Martine Bartlett
Heavenly Finley	Diana Hyland
Charles	Earl Snyder
Stuff	Bruce Dern
Miss Lucy	Madeleine Sherwood
Heckler	Charles Tyner
Violet	Monica May
Edna	Hilda Brawner
Scotty	Charles McDaniel
Bud	James Feter
Men in Bar	Duke Farley
	Ron Harper, Kenneth Blake
Page	Glenn Stensel

the second act it moves into a private house and then a hotel lobby. But nothing seems to be arranged for theatrical sensation. Knowing his subject with chilling intimacy, Mr. Williams daintily peels off layer after layer of the skin, body and spirit of his characters and leaves their nature exposed in the hideous humor and pathos of the truth. As a writer of prose drama, Mr. Williams has the genius of a poet.

Under Mr. Kazan's limp

direction, it is beautifully performed in the mood of a black incantation. Jo Mielziner has prepared wide settings with luminous backgrounds; and Paul Bowles has contributed spidery and tinkling music of exquisite texture.

In the central roles the acting is magnificent. Geraldine Page gives a fabulous performance as the decaying movie queen. Loose-jointed, gangling, raucous of voice, crumpled, shrewd, abandoned yet sensitive about some things that live in the heart, Miss Page is at the peak of form in this raffish characterization.

And Paul Newman's young man is the perfect companion-piece. Although he has a braggart, calculating exterior, he is as immature as an adolescent; brassy outside, terrified and remorseful when he stops strutting. As a political boss, Sidney Blackmer also gives a superb performance.

Despite the acrid nature of its material, "Sweet Bird of Youth" is Mr. Williams in a relaxed mood as a writer. He seems to have made some sort of peace with himself. "Sweet Bird of Youth" is one of his finest dramas.